DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 115 EA 026 800

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TITLE Positive Factors of Systemic Change Identified in a Local Board of Education.
PUB DATE Oct 94
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, October 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Board of Education Role; *Boards of Education; *Decision Making; Educational Assessment; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Governing Boards; Holistic Approach; Resistance to Change; *Systems Approach

ABSTRACT

The local board of education plays an important role in facilitating change at the local level. This paper examines factors supporting educational change in an urban school district by studying members of the local board of education. Data were derived from observations of board meetings, interviews with the five board of education members, and document analysis. Interviews were also conducted with three district administrators and one principal; a brief observation was conducted at a local elementary school. Findings showed that the attitudes and actions of the board members had a major impact on the change process. The board was united in a democratic respect for one another and the town's various constituencies, as well as maintaining the district's focus on academic achievement. An emphasis on professional and community development of knowledge and leadership skills challenged and empowered building staffs to collaborate, build consensus, and develop innovative learning opportunities. The board members encouraged risk taking, acknowledged that change takes time, allowed district requirements to be waived, and recognized the process of change is incremental. Their policies upheld their strategic plan and the annual instructional audit. These actions and attitudes served as positive factors of systemic change. However, negative factors of change included entrenched, disinterested, and untrained teachers; a lack of funds; and defensive attitudes toward self-assessment and program evaluation. (LMI)

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POSITIVE FACTORS OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE IDENTIFIED IN A LOCAL BOARD OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, the identification of the factors supporting educational change in a city school district occurred within the context of observing and interviewing the five members of the Steeltown Board of Education. The researcher found that, as the local governing unit, their attitudes and actions had a major impact on the change process. The board members were united in a democratic respect for one another and Steeltown's professional educators, students, parents, business, and citizens, and maintained the district's focus on student academic achievement. Emphasis on professional and community development of knowledge and leadership skills challenged and empowered building staffs to collaborate, build consensus, and develop innovative learning opportunities. The board members encouraged risk-taking, acknowledged that change takes time, allowed district requirements to be waived, and recognized incremental progress. Their policies upheld their strategic plan and the annual instructional audit for accountability. These actions and attitudes were positive factors of systemic change.

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Paper presented at the Mid-Western Educational Research Association, Annual Meeting, October 13, 1994, Chicago, IL.

Running Head: Factors of Systemic Change

EA 026 800

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Overview

Purpose

The objective of this qualitative study was to determine those factors that facilitated or hindered change in a single educational system by studying that system within the context of the actions and attitudes of the members the board of education. This particular board was chosen because the researcher had witnessed, over a period of a year, its members assuming leadership roles at state level conferences. These acts of leadership supplemented other presentations observed at state and local meetings, over a period of four years, in which Steeltown staff had led workshops concerning their district's innovative programs. The district board of education along with its professional staff were seriously involved in making educational opportunities better for students.

Perspective or Theoretical Framework

The local board of education is the important key to nurturing change at the building level. It has the power to make policy within the state requirements, to open the parameters and encourage creative innovation through local collaboration, and to sustain its development; in other words, "...high engagement and low bureaucracy" (Louis, 1989). By contrast, explained Fullan (1994), the board may maintain a tight, authoritative, grip on the schools, in the name of accountability, uniformity, and efficiency; he speculates that a school can develop innovative programs and be site-based managed, but can not sustain such innovations without the support of the district and its decisions concerning hiring, budget, and personnel. The district's strengths of providing prospective direction, incentives, networking, and retrospective monitoring, combined with the local schools' capacities for learning, creating, responding to, and contributing are more likely to achieve greater overall coherence, greater accountability (Fullan 1994), and political support (Senge, 1990).

Beer, Eisenstat and Spector (1990) discovered that "isolated pockets of change reflecting new behaviors lead to new thinking that eventually pushes structures and procedures to change." Systems do not change systems; "individuals change systems...Breakthroughs occur when productive connections amass, creating growing pressure for systems to change (Fullan, 1993a,b)." Fullan (1994) continued, "The more that top-down and bottom-up forces are coordinated, the more likely that complex systems will move toward greater effectiveness."

Systemic change is needed to address real educational restructuring said Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan (1986), in their national study of local school boards of education. The governing units: the state legislatures, the state school boards, and the local school boards are key to reducing restrictive parameters and allowing innovation to emerge and flourish at the school building level where it can be developed best, with the teachers, students, parents, principal, and community. Fuhrman (1993) used the systemic concept as she described the need for a coherent policy at the state level. The piecemeal bits of past legislation were not coordinated nor supportive of sustaining innovative change occurring in the classrooms and individual schools. The researcher defines systemic as pertaining to the system of public education in a single school district, understanding that the local district is a part of the larger state system of public education. Systemic also would refer to the concept that a change in one part of a system may affect other parts of the system. If the system does not have a unified set of general goals, certain activities within the system may be counter productive. If one school had several classroom teachers who had developed innovations beneficial to students but those innovations were blocked or discouraged by another part of the system, such as the principal, superintendent, or board, the chances of those innovations being sustained would be slim.

Focus

The focus was to identify the positive and negative factors influencing change within the Steeltown Schools. What were the board members doing collectively to bring about this change for improvement? How did they understand their actions and attitudes encouraging and maintaining the complicated situations of the training for learning of staff, the building of consensus within a school community, and the developing of innovative programs at the individual buildings aimed at benefitting all students and their achievement? How did the board members define these positive factors? Did they understand the existence of negative factors blocking the needed change? What were their highest, personal, priorities for the school district? What personal qualities, as they understood, were necessary and important for board members to have? How did this productive quality of collective behavior come about? By studying the members of the board, the researcher was able to determine the factors that facilitated and hindered educational change in their district.

Methods of a Qualitative Study

Site Selection

The Steeltown City Schools District was selected as the site for study due to evidence of positive educational change developing within its schools. Several buildings had designed major innovative programs to meet the complex learning requirements of their students, including a non-graded, continuous progress elementary and an alternative high school serving at-risk students. Many of the schools were working towards or had become site-based managed buildings. The community and businesses were actively collaborating with the school district. Teachers were becoming more skilled in using portfolios to assess students' work. The teachers' union and administration had formed the Labor-Management Council and participated in interest based bargaining.

Selection of Participants

The five Steeltown Board of Education members were selected because of the spirited encouragement of educational change developing within their schools and their sharing of experiences and inservicing schools outside of their district, as the researcher had observed. The board members included one woman, a former teacher, who had served twelve years; one retired steel company statistician who had served eight years; two steel company men who had served six years and two years, respectively; and a pediatrician who had served four years. Four members were White; one was Black; two had gone through the school system; three had run for the board because of the chaos and non-communication/non-cooperation of past board members; three had been asked by friends to run and speak for them. All board members had at least two children who were going through the system when they first ran for office. They came representing different areas of the community and unified in their focus on children. Except for one, they enthusiastically believed in their superintendent and credited him with initiating change in 1990 through the Ohio Effective Schools Process. The president of the board explained, "Rather than expending negative energy, we embraced the Ohio School Reform Act, Senate Bill 140 and took that opportunity to improve our schools."

Instrumentation: Observations and Semi-Structured Interviews

The researcher observed four board of education meetings, recording, transcribing, and analyzing data before holding semi-structured interviews, forty-five to ninety minutes in length, with each of the five board members, held, except for one, at the board building. The interviews were built around open-ended questions: Why had each decided to become a board member? How had they become the unified, respectful, and committed board whom the researcher had observed? How did they understand the change taking place in their district? What were the factors allowing change to come about? What were the factors hindering change? What were the most important priorities each would like the district to address? These interviews were also recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

To verify the data of the board members, the researcher also carried out semi-structured, hour long, interviews with the superintendent, assistant for administrative affairs, the public relations/business person, and the principal of Team Academy/K-6 Curriculum Director, using similar questions. A half day observation at Team Academy and informal conversations with several teachers and parents transpired. Discussions centered on their perceptions as to what was going on in their school, how did it come about, and what did they think about it. Other parents offered ideas, and numerous students and staff reported on their activities at the board meetings. These dialogues were recorded and analyzed. The researcher studied central office communications, state reports, and instructional audits: the Quality Communicator, the 1992-1993 Ohio Education Management Information Systems Report (E.M.I.S.), the 1992 and 1993 Instructional Audits, the Blueprint for the Future (Steeltown's strategic plan), and the May 12, 1994 [community] Focus Group Discussion and Consensus Summary on the Strengths and Challenges of the District, and the Desired Attributes for the New Superintendent, and continued to attend a total of thirteen Board of Education meetings from January through September 1994.

Analysis of Data

The analysis resulted in grouping information into five categories. Successful Democratic Education means that all children of all cultures should have equity and adequacy of successful learning opportunities that encourage growth toward potential. Continuously Developing

Professionalism is defined as the highest level of behavior, competence, and skills in carrying out one's responsibilities. It can pertain to educators, parents, students, board members, business, and community people. Positive Productive Citizen - Lifelong Learner pertains to taking responsibilities of that citizenship, being able to earn a living, and protecting and contributing to our world. Respect for Interdependence is a dynamic interplay of individuals with a deep respect for one another which allows full collaboration and consensus-building. Resources: Money, Time, People are critical elements in public education as education is a people business. Buying time and services and employing people cost money. Without adequate resources the needed opportunities cannot be offered, and certain students are not served.

Interpretation

The major themes, which the researcher calls factors of systemic change, developed from the five categories. The positive factors of systemic change are difficult to list because they fall into three groupings: factors that are strategies to initiate and produce change, factors that nurture and sustain change, and factors that are aims, goals, or results to be accomplished. Those actions, activities, and attitudes that hinder change are called negative factors.

Positive Factors of Systemic Change

The most important positive factors in the Steeltown District include, first, the commitment for all children to successfully learn and be respected in a multiculturally diverse community (Shor, 1992) and, second, to the increased professional knowledge bases and skill building of staff and community (O'Day & Smith, 1993). Other positive factors comprise interdependency with parent and community involvement, collaborative team problem-solving up and down as well as sideways in the educational hierarchy, and advanced communication skills including listening, questioning, full-disclosure, and shared decision making (Covey, 1989; Foster, 1986; Freire, 1972; Senge, 1993). Adequate, equitable, and consistent resources of money, time, and people (Goodlad, 1984; O'Day & Smith, 1993) are critical as positive factors to support public education, staff development, and to prevent overload of individuals struggling with change. Specific people have specific value and do not seem respected if easily and involuntarily moved about (Pascale, 1990). Trust is necessary and requires time and patience to build (Buber, 1958, Palmer, 1993). Encouragement, the right to fail,

recognition and appreciation for effort, along with time for reflection (Foster, 1986), self-assessment, and personal growth are necessary, as are high expectations for all and deep personal and organizational commitment to the focus (O'Day & Smith, 1993). Awareness of the problem, being able to define the problem, and the challenge, the desire, and commitment towards solving the problem are also important (Pascale, 1990). Lastly, it is necessary to be able to assess the success of the solution, evaluate, and readjust activity to realign with the focus (Goodlad, 1984).

Specific people and teams, successfully developing plans for a specific environment, may not work as productively if teams are split up or some members are exchanged. Creative collaboration needs some consistency of personnel which can provide a basis of personal trust, and the knowledge of one another's skills and perspectives; people are not interchangeable parts. A different team will bring about different results which can be good or bad (Pascale, 1990).

The collaborative team members need to be knowledgeable of the why's, what's, and how's of each person's work to give and receive undergirding for risk-taking and encouragement when plans fail (Morgan, 1986). People can not be strangers and support each other effectively. They need to know one another well enough to realize both their colleagues' strengths and weaknesses. The team members' interests must to be clear and focused toward the same vision or main objective. They will realize self- and group-assessment are critical to maintain that focus. If they respect one another, they will be more willing to work hard together, be tolerant, less defensive, patient, and more forgiving. Deeper and broader knowledge concerning educating children and how public education relates to its environment is crucial (Schubert, 1993; Goodlad, 1984). Professional educators will work at building a consensus within the school community to decide importance questions: What are our schools for? What should children learn? What are the best ways of learning? How well are we doing? What could we do better? This respect for interdependence includes, not only the professional educators, but the parents, students, community, business, and government. The community supports the teachers, and the school is helping the community. They are a team.

Communication skills need to be developed more deeply for listening and conversing in a manner that encourages and validates others' opinions while, at the same time, enables one to express honest thoughts and opinions in a manner so as not to insult the other or put the person on the

defensive. A genuine give and take dialogue includes concerned listening, real sharing, and challenging inquiry. These are important tools of change into the next paradigm. Continuous self-and group assessment need to check and balance the progress and the side effects of new policies and the focus of the commitment.

These two factors, advanced communications skills for innovation and consensus building and honest, constant assessment, starting with the individual responsible for assessing him/ herself, have not been regular features in public education in the past. Bureaucracy has told professional educators what to do and when. Therefore, the top of the hierarchy has controlled the dialogue and the assessment/evaluation. The bottom of the hierarchy has given the top what it wanted to hear, without a high priority for the significance of the information or how this all affected the client, the student.

The belief that all students can learn and have the right to successful, democratic, learning opportunities, no matter what their needs, is imperative in developing future citizens who can take charge of their lives and be contributors to a better society. This belief will become the focus of planning and effort in the public schools in districts that succeed and sustain educational reform.

Negative Factors of Systemic Change

A critique on site-based management is provided by Fullan, (1994). Site-based decision making or collaboration must be purposely developed for increasing teaching strategies, skills, and meeting the educational needs of the students more effectively. The focus on children must emphasize their successful learning. Pointing to the growing evidence, Fullan (1994) cites Taylor and Teddlie (1992), Weiss (1992), and Hallinger, Murphy, and Hausman (1991) who state that educators were not making connections "between new governance structures and the teaching-learning process" (p. 11). Their collective research shows that being a site-based managed school does not automatically result in teachers becoming more aware of student concerns or becoming more skilled in curriculum and pedagogical matters.

The administrator of Team Academy/K-6 curriculum coordinator said, "The other high schools wanted to send all their problems to Opportunity Alternative High School [specifically designed for at-risk students]. The principal would not accept them because their problems were not targeted in

their unique high school program." This would be an example of simply passing difficult students on to someone else, not responsibly understanding and dealing with students' needs where they exist.

An administrator contributed, "Make sure that your building leadership teams understand that professional skill building is the most critical factor. You have got to set the vision, the focus, of where you want to go and realize that you have to gain the skills to get yourselves there."

The biggest negative factor block to progress mentioned seems to be entrenched, disinterested, and untrained teachers. The second one is a lack of funds for training, up-dating of students' curriculum materials, and hiring adequate personnel to do the work. A third factor is defensive attitudes toward self-assessment and evaluations of educational programs in the classrooms. Teachers prefer to ignore self-assessment activities which would help them understand the effectiveness of their teaching to all their students.

Professional evaluators recommended in the 1993 Instructional Audit:

> Yet in embryonic stages in most schools in [Steeltown] is the analysis of student achievement data--individually and in terms of discrete student population groupings--and the application of these data to measure instructional success (methodology, materials, sequencing, assessing). To determine student progress in terms of teaching expectations, students should be tested on what they are taught. What is taught, when, and how, are the factors that should determine program changes. Assessment and instruction are two determinants that now need more attention...to affirm control of resources, to set clear and valid objectives for students, to document which programs work best, and to use assessments for improving, adjusting and terminating programs (p. 38).

"I am afraid the 1994 Instructional Audit is going to disappoint some people. This third year is going to be the test. We are past the point of the halo effect. This change is either helping more students learn better, or it is not," commented a board member. The administrator of Team Academy added, "That Instructional Audit is a smoke screen. It says what schools want it to say."

"If anything can destroy what we are building, it will be the human element of jealousy. When something rises to the top, instead of supporting, a lot of people tend to shoot at it, " added a board member.

"What makes children not like school?" the board member continued. "A sixth grader did a science fair project asking every classroom of students in his school to raise their hands if they liked school. In the second grades, thirty children said that they did not like school. That staff seems very committed, but it is nonsense to lock-step children." Some negative factors blocking improved teaching-learning situations and children's enjoyment of school are isolation of educators and little training for collaboration with other teachers to solve problems. Their resistance to and fear of change grows from and produces a lack of self-confidence. They remain comfortable with what they have been doing, even though there are a certain number of children every year who are really not served by their strategies. Their lack of commitment and/or overload of classroom problems conflict with their search for creative, better ways to enable children to learn. Therefore, they fear their supervisors' evaluation and seem unable to develop their own assessment instruments for accountability.

"The increased amount of work of each person has to put out, reduces the time in which a person could work at learning more," offered an administrator. "How are we structured as an organization? Are our systems in the district and in the buildings helping us move along?"

An administrator said, "Flexibility is a strength, but the state considers it a weakness. Education is an extremely political process, and that creates one of the most difficult problems. After every state election, we receive a different educational agenda."

The economic policy-making sphere that decides the tax bases for our country and its states ultimately decides whose children and which schools are going to be adequately served. Since the 1980's, this scenario is glaring and ugly. The percentage of districts financially able to adequately fund their schools, stimulate professional development and skills and, consequently, student achievement has dwindled from 20% to 15% and is possibly lower in 1994 (Shor,1992; Reich, 1992). Steeltown must depend not only upon taxes but commercial loans to keep its lean organization operating. One needs to reflect back upon the economic problem. Professional educators have experienced financial neglect, disrespect, and little autonomy (Carl & Kimmis, 1986) in varying degrees since World War II, and as such, have not been known for their risk-taking, creative, and innovative characteristics. In the last twelve years this neglect has been magnified by tax legislation,

increasing an ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots (Reich, 1990). Since 1981 in Ohio public school districts, the bottom 80 % has been disabled through decreased property valuation while the upper 20 % has benefitted from increased property valuation (Ohio Department of Education, 1992). The property tax is the backbone of public education finance in the state. In 1981, 43.64 % of the state's wealth supported the richest 30% of the public school districts which increased to 45.93 % of the state's wealth in 1991. By contrast in 1981, 19.45 % of the state's wealth supported the poorest 30 % of the public school districts which decreased to 18.17 % of the state's wealth in 1991 (Ohio Department of Education, 1990-91, Graph 1, Data Tape 0945).

The factors are priorities and elements of innovative, restructured public education promoting systemic change, change in the total public education system originating at the root level, the local districts and their schools in Ohio. The local school board is bound by the structures, the tax laws, and educational policies that are mandated by the highest level, the Ohio General Assembly, and the Ohio Board of Education. Systemic change can not spread, if freedom for initiative, increased knowledge, focus on all children, deep commitment, risk-taking, and morally responsible financing are not provided at the top of the educational hierarchy at the state level, boards of education at the local level, so that innovative programs can happen in the classrooms, at the bottom. The negative blocks or factors slow the pace of change making it unable to overcome the inertia of the status quo. In essence, all parts of the public education system, the total hierarchy, must be aligned in the focus for providing successful democratic education for all the students in the system (Educational Technology, November 1992 & Educational Leadership , September 1993). Specifically this case study dealt with a local board of education and its focus on doing what was best for all the children in the district. All decisions had to line up with this focus because all changes, or lack of improvement, affected the total system. The board members must encourage risk-taking, challenge the increase of professional learning and assessment, and provide training for professional and community collaboration. They must recognize and support staff to sustain innovation. Change, which is the reality, must be managed systematically.

Relevant Research

The nature of qualitative research leads the researcher to open many doors of inquiry and understandings unknown and unplanned at the commencement of the research. Thus, additional literature is sought for verification and clarity of concepts.

Faulty Assumptions

Roots of Reform: Challenging the Assumptions that Control Change in Education, by Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, and deKoven Pelton Fernandez, L. (1994) set forth the traditional assumptions by which public education has organized itself since the turn of the century and has attempted unsuccessfully to reform itself since the 1980's. The authors group these assumptions into the political, social, structural contexts of schooling, the individual within the school context, and the school process. They challenge these traditional assumptions by posing counter assumptions based on research. Unless their second set of assumptions are taken seriously and replace the traditional ones, they feel that there is little chance of successful, democratic educational reform which is to benefit our children, to entitle them to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (p.81). To say that investment in the reform will save us money on welfare, health care, and incarceration in the future, is begging the question. We cannot use our children as a way out of our economic dilemmas or our problem with foreign competition. The following are their nine basic shifts in assumptions:

One, the assumption of the individual, going it alone, needs to shift to institutional responsibility for achievement.

Two, instrumentality for the sake of economic prosperity and social stability must give way to the assumption of entitlement.

Three, the assumption that external and bureaucratic control must give way to empowerment of the administrator and teachers at the local school level.

Four, the assumption of inevitability of social reproduction must shift to interruptability of outcomes.

Five, the assumption of bureaucracy as the theory of organization for school must give way to democracy.

Six, the assumption of commonality, that our citizenry has mainly a common cultural background, must give way to the factual ever increasing diversity of our people.

Seven, we need to shift from interconnected services to comprehensive child and family services.

Eight, the unchallenged fundamental value of competition deeply embedded in the American culture must be replaced by the assumption of collaboration.

Nine, the assumption of intervention from the outside in order to bring about school reform must be replaced by facilitation for real change at the local level where there are many unique and individual problems that defy a uniform solution.

Three Theories of the Logic of Change

In order to grasp, shape, and guide the factors and forces of systemic change, some understanding of the logic of change is needed. Morgan (1986, p. 268) interprets and applies, to organizations, the theory of autopoiesis set forth by Maturana and Varela, two Chilean biologists.

> ... to achieve a form of self-referential closure in relation to their environments, enacting their environments as projections of their own identity or self-image....many of the problems that organizations encounter in dealing with their environments are intimately connected with the kind of identity that they try to maintain....explanations of the evolution, change, and development of organizations must give primary attention to the factors that shape an organization's self-identity, and hence its relations with the wider world (p. 240).

If organizations and individuals can think and act systemically with more self-reflection, less self-centredness, they can choose the self-image that will guide their actions and help shape their future (p. 246,247).

Magorah Maruyama (1982), incorporating the theory of cybernetics (p. 247-248), explains the dynamics of a system through feedback loops. "Processes of negative feedback, where a change in a variable initiates changes in the opposite direction, are important in accounting for the stability of systems." People react to solve their problems. Whereas, positive feedback in which "more leads to more and less, to less," accounted for system change (p. 247). In other words, too much of a good thing often leads to over-saturation. This theory of "mutual causality" and a "pattern

of relations" challenges us "to find ways of redefining the total system to strengthen the pattern of relations that we wish to maintain" (p. 249). Morgan suggested, "It is possible to influence the pattern of relations generating demand as well as supply, and to design interventions that take advantage of... collaborative action in the solution of shared problems" (p. 252).

The theory of the logic of dialectical change, incorporated in the ancient Chinese ying and yang and Marx's (1976) analysis of social change concerned opposites existing in a state of tension while defining a state of harmony and wholeness (p. 255). Extremes tend to turn around and produce opposite qualities. When one reached its extreme, it already contains the seed of the opposite force within itself (256) Morgan observes that our "ability to think in lines,...tends to hamper our ability to think dialectically. We thus fail to appreciate how the seeds of the future are always enfolded in the oppositions shaping the present" (265). If individuals are aware that tension, or change, is reality, they can begin to choose the kind of contradiction that shapes the pattern of their daily lives (p. 267). This theory provided hope that within our educational problems lay the seed for their solutions.

What can we do with these theories of the logics of change? By understanding the possible logic, nature, and source of change itself, we could think and act on a new, higher level concerning how we wished to manage change. Morgan suggests that these three theories are complementary and can be integrated to help develop the logic by which we produce and reproduce our world (p. 268). If we only deal with the surface logic, then we will only achieve short-term, surface results. By understanding the problem within the logic of the changes that produce it, we open the possibilities for improving and reforming the system and the relationships involved. He provides a suggestion: "begin locally through an examination of specific problems that may be then found to be connected with wider systemic issues"....which "may need to be addressed on a broader front with others sharing the same concerns" through broad-based community and political action (p. 270). To strengthen our total population's knowledge base, in order to manage change and survive, makes successful democratic education for all, regardless of age, even more critical. One can understand that these theories will battle the concepts of idealism, determinism, and unpredictability.

The Smoothness and Roughness of Change

How do we facilitate change happening? How do we know the change we hope to bring about was for the best and does not, itself, create more problems? By constantly assessing and realizing that every action seems to have a backflow of reaction other than what we have predicted or planned. By being alert, flexible, and focused, we can search for the negative effects and deal with them, studying and nurturing the positive ones.

Richard T. Pascale (1990) offers some suggestions. Smoothness and roughness guides organizations from one paradigm into another. Everyone is learning; no one is polished in this procedure. They may never be because the problems are constantly shifting. One must be flexible to change with them, to be able to perceive what is actually going on in a different paradigm. If one becomes too polished and accomplished in the change process that possibly means that flexibility has been substituted by sophistication. People who assist with change respect one another and seek others' input. They challenge and search for expertise. They develop advanced communication skills that demonstrate that respect, and at the same time, gently and genuinely listen and share beliefs and views. Nothing can be taken for granted. Many questions must be asked of all concerned. There cannot be a single handbook, since each organization develops what it needs. The training skills and personnel need to match the situation and the problems.

The Profession of Education

Carr and Kemmis, in discussing the elements of professionalism, list a systematically developed body of knowledge and skills, the overriding commitment to the well-being of their clients (including the community), and professional autonomy concerning the organizational structure and its standards, constraints, and activities. Educational research needs to encompass, not only curriculum and pedagogy, but also the skills of collaborative discussions within the profession concerning its broader social, political, and cultural context (1986). As a result, educators can identify their beliefs and ideas, make and defend informed judgments to interested parties, and assist the development of their professional autonomy and responsibilities (p.10). "In collaborative action research, the development of educational theories is carried out as an integral part of the development

of education itself; the development of educational policies is carried out as an integral part of the democratic process of educational reform" (p. 220).

Progress for the Future

The Steeltown Board of Education found a way to capitalize on their differences by focusing upon the best learning situations for all children. It is not how they conform to one another, but how they keep their differences and conform to a common grounding, a deep commitment to the students and the community. They challenge, "Are we doing the best for our children? How do we know?

In 1990, when the board, its superintendent, the business community, and the leaders of the teachers' union came together and decided to act as a unit, they picked up the challenge put forth by the Ohio Legislature's omnibus education reform act, Senate Bill 140, and began to improve Steeltown Schools. With this unity and community support, they were able to pass levies for the first time in three years, and obtain a commitment from each other to collaborate and support the schools in the decade of the nineties. This unity, replacing dissention and lack of communication, was the beginning of the board of education's and its schools' journey on the continuum of change.

As the researcher analyzed their dialogues, it became clearer that the successful democratic educational change proceeds and expands in all directions along a continuum. The right end is anchored in the ideological structure of the status quo, the way things have always been. The far left end is ever evolving, moving jerkily with a unpredictable pace, toward the understanding and elimination of inequities and inappropriate practices that continued to exist in the public schools in Steeltown, reaching towards a more fully democratic society in the future. School staffs desiring or being challenged to provide better, student-suitable, educational programs will begin to study, to read, and to search. As they complete one project, they will begin to move on this continuum. With each project, they will understand more widely and deeply and move farther along on the continuum of democratic educational change. The president of the Steeltown Board said, "Change from the bottom up takes longer, is more frustrating. Business was frustrated at how slowly we changed. They don't understand you can't demand certain actions when you are dealing with the development of children. The school board has created an environment receptive for change."

As a district, the Steeltown City Schools are collectively moving along this continuum. Yet, each individual school has ownership in its unique rate, process, and content of programs (Evans, 1994). Their schools are scattered, not bunched together, on this continuum of improvement. Some schools are much farther along, and for them there will be no turning back. The clear district focus and common grounding are critical for managing and sustaining change, but each school building, within its own student-parent community, has to clarify the specific details of doing what is best for children. If interdependence of the total school community are continually engaged, those children will be given the opportunity to succeed in their learning and become productive, responsible adults

Steeltown's budgeting is frugal, but many extensive grants have been written and received to supplement staff development, innovation, and expansion of their professional knowledge bases. Education is a unique type of organization. Children are the raw material and the product, but they cannot be discarded or sorted through, chosen or not chosen to receive an education appropriate to their real needs. They must be given a chance to grow up and choose their way of contributing to their society. The board of education must take the responsibility to educate the community on the financial requirements of successful democratic education. Only the board of education can resolve to go for a levy in Ohio, and they must have the courage and conviction to do so. The key factors of change depend upon a more equitable and adequate method of funding from the highest level, the Ohio General Assembly. Fuhrman's (1993) coherent education policy for systemic change would charge the state structures of public education to recognize and encourage continuing and evolving improvement, valuing all students, fitting their needs honorably within a democratic participatory community and state.

Steeltown is on the continuum to becoming a learning community (Senge,1990). If the schools are to increase the development of responsible, productive citizens and life-long learners, instead of disenfranchising children at an early age, educators, legislators, and citizens are going to have to come together and decide how to provide such an education. The citizens who have been given their voices in public education will be empowered to learn. If stratifications of society are dissolved for this dialogue, people can grow from each other (Fuhrman,1993). If the legislators see real success at the local levels, and participate in that dialogue, the researcher hopes that the local

improvement, as it moves along the continuum of change, will drive the systemic change at the highest level. As the actual success is multiplied to the critical mass, it may even empower those proclaiming the benefits of the status quo to come to understand that the restrictive parameters must be loosened; in a democratic society, more than one way can be acceptable and suitable.

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Date Filmed
November 7, 1995